Cold Weather Plan launched

1 November 2011 - Government, Age UK and Met Office launch plans to keep people warm and healthy in the cold weather. A new plan to keep people warm and healthy throughout the cold winter months was launched today by Health Secretary Andrew Lansley.

The schemes focus on helping the most vulnerable people by launching a Cold Weather Plan - which will be jointly run with the Met Office and Health Protection Agency - to advise people how to stay healthy thus relieving the pressures on the NHS which winter always brings.

Severe cold weather can be dangerous for vulnerable groups such as older people and those with serious illnesses. It's important for people to look after their health as the winter months can mean:

- an increase in heart attacks and stroke - accounting for 40 per cent of excess winter deaths;
- pressure on GPs - GP visits for respiratory illnesses increase by up to 19 per cent for every 1 °C drop below 5 °C of the mean temperature;
- more pressure on the NHS - in 2009/10, the cost of emergency admissions due to falls on snow and ice was estimated at £42million; and
- it is estimated that over £850 million is spent by the NHS each year as a result of the impact of cold housing on people's health.

Met Office figures show that December 2010 was the coldest December in the UK since 1910 and the winter before was the coldest since 1978. While many associate cold weather with hypothermia, deaths directly caused by this represent only a small proportion.

Health Secretary, Andrew Lansley, said, "We want everyone to get ready for winter and be prepared before temperatures drop. Older people and those with long term illnesses are particularly vulnerable to the cold and we need to be aware - within families, in communities and across the NHS - of how we can help others when the winter temperatures drop. Every year, there is a 20 per cent increase in deaths in the winter in England. By working together, this coordinated plan will help protect those most in need, we are determined to do all we can to achieve this."

The Cold Weather Plan is supported by a Met Office cold weather alert service that will run from 1 November 2011 to 31 March 2012. The Cold Weather alert service has four levels that depend on the severity of conditions. Together the plan and alerts aim to prepare, alert and prevent the effects of winter weather on people's health by helping keep people well.

The four levels are:

- Level 1 winter preparedness - long term planning
- Level 2 severe winter weather is forecast - 60 per cent risk of extreme cold lasting more than 48 hours
- Level 3 response to severe winter weather - we are experiencing severe weather which is expected to have an impact on peoples health and health services
- Level 4 major incident - exceptional widespread winter weather causing disruptions

The 'big freeze' at the end of last year would have been classified as level 3. Further details of the action needed at each level can be found at http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/uk/coldweatheralert/

John Hirst, Chief Executive of the Met Office, said, "The Met Office is proud to be able to support the Department of Health, the Health Protection Agency and Age UK with their winter preparedness. These alerts will put everyone in a better position to respond to forecasts of severe weather, inform those who are most at risk from winter weather and what they can do to keep well."

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